

The Quest for Olwen. Directed by Valeri Ugarov. Script by Gwyn Thomas. Produced by Metta (Llangolen, Wales) and Soyuzmultfilm (Moscow) for S4C and HTV (Wales), 1990. Videotape available from Films for the Humanities & Sciences, P.O. Box 2053, Princeton, NJ 08543-2053 (1-800-257-5126). 22 minutes. \$89.95.

Although animators have created more than fifty film treatments of the Arthurian legend, the matter of Wales has curiously all but escaped their notice. In 1990 Welsh television S4C corrected this oversight with *The Quest for Olwen*, a twenty-two-minute animated feature based squarely on *Culhwch and Olwen* from *The Mabinogion*. While purists will always find details to quibble over in any adaptation, they will also discover that scriptwriter Gwyn Thomas and the crew of Soviet artists who animated *The Quest for Olwen* do a reasonably faithful job of rendering *Culhwch and Olwen* for younger and/or less-sophisticated audiences that otherwise would be put off by some of the original tale's difficulties. As such, the film can be a useful classroom adjunct when teaching the matter of Wales.

The producers could not have found a more sympathetic author than Thomas for the task of simplifying the story to meet the exigencies of a short film. He has repeatedly streamlined the tale: as librettist for William Mathias's 1971 twenty-eight-minute Welsh/English choral work for children, *Culhwch ac Olwen: Difyrwch*, as author of a 1988 modern Welsh version of *Culhwch* for children, and as author of a 1988 English version as well, *The Quest for Olwen*, the immediate source behind this animated feature. Over the years, Thomas has labored to pare the narrative to its essential elements without doing harm to the intent of the original. In this film, he has generally done well.

In the animated version of *The Quest for Olwen*, after a mercifully brief narrator's 'historical' introduction, the story moves rapidly through Culhwch's unusual birth in the pig-run, the curse of love (Culhwch's quest for Olwen) his stepmother places upon him, his journey to Arthur's court for help in finding Olwen, Culhwch's first meeting with Olwen, and then on to Olwen's father, the giant Ysbaddaden, for the tasks Culhwch must complete before Olwen will be his and the giant will die—here, expiring when he sees his shaved face in a mirror rather than dying at the hands of one of Arthur's knights. Thomas strategically abridges the tale to limit Culhwch's adventures, trimming the original's many tasks to just four major ones: (1) recovering and planting the flax seed necessary for Olwen's bridal veil, (2) gaining the scissors and comb of the giant boar, Twrch Trwyth, to groom Ysbaddaden, (3) finding Mabon, the hunter who will be required to locate Twrch, and (4) obtaining the blood of the Black Witch, needed to shave Ysbaddaden's tough beard. Thomas's revision is not unreasonable, given that even the original relates only a few of Culhwch's adventures in any detail.

The animators take more liberties than the scriptwriter. For instance, the object of Culhwch's quest is on screen more than a reading of the tale might suggest, making the film more clearly a love story than the original warrants. In fact, this film is *The Quest for Olwen*—without even a 'Culhwch' in the title—and the visuals have sometimes been skewed to emphasize this new perspective. The animators have also given themselves free rein in determining what the Welsh original's sketchy heroine should be. It is intriguing, albeit not altogether clear, what the animators intend when they introduce us to Olwen by tilting down from an empty meadow to her *reflection*, upside down, on the face of rippling waters, then reframe and tilt up so as to suggest, just momentarily, that there is nothing to cast that reflection. This possibility—that she is some kind of water sprite—continues when Culhwch tries to touch her in their first encounter and finds that a watery force field separates them. The animators take other liberties as well, portraying the Black Witch as a character drawn most probably (and most inappropriately) from *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Anyone familiar with Tim the Enchanter's pyrotechnic display will have a hard time suppressing a giggle as the Black Witch cackles before his cave while hopping about the landscape by means of whirlwinds and lightning. And Arthur's defeat of the witch—with a laser-shooting Excalibur more fitting for a Jedi knight than a medieval king—will jar even an unsophisticated audience. Still, these odd moments are minor flaws in a film that educators can profitably use to explore the original text of *Culhwch and Olwen*, both for the ways *The Quest for Olwen* often accurately captures the gist of the medieval tale and for the many other ways it does not.

michael n. salda
University of Southern Mississippi